

Kitchen-Table Hospitality

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Kitchen-Table Hospitality

by [HHarris](#)

Summary

Investigating a string of murders, Will Graham slowly awakens to the fact that he is a werewolf. Hannibal Lecter, a dhampir with his own agenda, nurtures this change.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

The First Time It Happens

Chapter Summary

Will's dreams have been changing for some time. Now he's waking up in increasingly odd situations plagued by monstrous visions (and lustful dreams) featuring Hannibal. Will struggles to cope.

The first time it happens –

No, that's not right.

In truth, Will could not clearly pinpoint the first time. He simply became slowly aware that he might not be dreaming.

Dreams were easier if they were about someone else. Rude of your own mind to reveal something of yourself you aren't prepared to see. Whatever washed up during his nightly flood of visions, Will wanted to choose which trinkets to pocket and worry like bits of sea glass. Hold them up to the light and see the truth of the world cast in shades of ocean green. Let the rest of the driftwood and debris sink back into the squall, hopeful the next wave won't churn them back to the shore. Too often Will's mind was a trawling net thrown wide, pulling in any stinking garbage that floats in polluted waters.

But sometimes fishing was like that. Catch and release.

The sun would set and Will would measure two fingers of whiskey (plus two more on worse nights), dulling himself against the coming onslaught. Lay him down to sleep in his little wooden bed like an open canoe bobbing on the fitful sea. Hoping for the best, but prepared for the worst. Praying for night's dead blackness to come gently with no visions or thoughts or feelings to follow him back into the light of day.

Will was getting used to the nightmares. Well, not exactly *used* to them. (Who could ever be?) But most nights he expected to awake drenched in panicked sweat, breathless and disoriented, throat raw from his own screams and dogs whining in concern at his feet. He had come to consider those "good" nights.

Other mornings defied explanation. Blinking awake shivering on his crumpled kitchen rug, or somehow under the chilly front porch – unaware of leaving his bed or what had happened to find him there. Sometimes he was lulled into consciousness standing among the line of trees at the perimeter of his home. Once, damp and curled on his shower floor, unclothed and stinking of earth and forest ash, the coppery crust of blood on his teeth and in his nose.

The content of his dreams had also been slowly changing, much more than he liked to admit. Unpleasant as they were, his terrors held purpose. He could use the dark clarity they provided. Now they turned wild and unpredictable, fading to a jumble of sense and sensation.

Death and sex. It was almost funny. Dr. Lecter might call it Freudian.

God, the last thing Will wanted to do was broach the subject of his dreams with Hannibal. His subconscious had conjured a great many things best left hidden from the good doctor, no matter how close they were becoming or how comfortable and easy their friendship seemed. Will would also be ashamed to admit how frequently Hannibal himself featured in his dreams, in form and concept in all directions.

Will's mind played all kinds of tricks when left to its own devices.

Some nights Hannibal assumed the monstrous shape of a killer Will pursued in waking life, nearly unrecognizable in his savagery. A wake of blood and death left behind for Will to chase into the shifting shadows. Other nights, Will found himself transformed and pursued. Bones twisting and cracking as his humanity slipped, deforming into something entirely other. Claws erupted from his fingertips, teeth built to tear pushed their way through his gums, and terror howled in his lungs.

And increasingly these visions of Hannibal and himself would blur and melt from the terrifyingly surreal to the utterly divine:

Waking with the hazy sense memory of firm, well-manicured hands trailing reverently up the tender inner edges of Will's unsteady thighs. A wet, open mouth ghosting breath on his heaving belly. Delicate fingers twisting into the small hairs at the base of his neck, holding him there with sharp insistence. Soft lips dragging the sensitive curve of his throat – hot, damp gusts of air over his too-quick pulse. The phantom sting of teeth and the (impossible, embarrassing, exquisite) echo of Will's own high and needy moans ringing his ears, chasing him into daylight.

On those mornings Will would wake with a rude, heavy weight between his legs, begging for attention. An impatient reminder of what his traitorous mind allowed him to enjoy unshackled in the long expanse of night.

He would guiltily indulge with gritted teeth and fast breath knowing he was far too old for this high school shit.

A few minutes of breathless work and Will could squeeze these less-than-professional thoughts of Hannibal out of his body and back into the deep undercurrent of his mind. Return to the motions of proper life and try not to register the thrill in his stomach or heat in his groin when he noticed (or *thought* he noticed?) Hannibal's gaze lingering a moment longer or fonder than usual. If Will flushed or hesitated, Hannibal was sure to notice. He was so very perceptive, but Will did his best to compartmentalize these aberrations for the sake of them both.

Hannibal was quickly becoming a steady and stable companion, ready partner, and a gracious guide and friend. Despite Will's first prickly efforts to distance himself and dissuade Hannibal

from discovering his inner workings, he had picked a path to the brambled center of Will's mind and affections so effortlessly. Hannibal had insinuated himself into Will's life despite all of his protests. He had become an anchor for Will in his too chaotic and intense experience of the worst of the world.

When he felt too much or too often, Hannibal could draw him back and tie him to solid ground. Help Will pick through the connections by *being* connected. He was solid and real, and however like or unlike Will, Hannibal also carried the gift of understanding. In many ways, they were alone together: ridiculous men in an even more ridiculous world.

But despite whatever desires his unruly mind whispered under cover of darkness, Will knew he had a knack for seeing more than what was really there. His lifetime of attempts at being *social* had proved without a doubt that he was too bizarre and broken to be desirable as anything more than a sideshow speaker for the dead.

It would be indelicate at best and insane at worst to assume anything more than what meets the eye when it came to his relationship with Hannibal. Will was not meant to experience the normal pleasures of an easy life. His path was to be a mute witness to the screams of victims painted on thin air. His wants did not matter or factor into his place in the world.

Hannibal had graced him with easy friendship and understanding. It should be enough.

Plus, Will was certain that telling your therapist that you're having blood-soaked wet dreams about them would be considered a hard boundary in most psychiatric circles. It was generally easier for Will to be patient with his nightmares than to risk becoming one of Hannibal's nightmare patients.

It was all so *stupid*.

But this... this was new.

Of Bathrooms And Boat Motors

Chapter Summary

Will wakes in Hannibal's home with no memory of how he arrived there. To his relief and embarrassment, Dr. Lecter tends his wandering new friend with a gentle bath and early-morning companionship.

It had been a hard few days, followed by even more difficult nights. Will blinked into consciousness standing shaking and dry-mouthed in Hannibal's pristine kitchen, cold sweat plastering clothes to his skin and curls against his forehead. He felt dizzy and disoriented, nauseous and weak, battling to understand how he had gone from standing with Jack before a pile of limbs in a chilly cove to the familiar comfort of Dr. Lecter's Baltimore home.

Hannibal navigated his dim kitchen with neat purpose, preparing two mugs of steaming amber liquid – its smell earthy and sharp. He had been speaking in a low current for some time, the ebb of his tones pulling Will back to himself, although it took a few moments for the sounds to register as language above the jagged sound of his own heartbeat.

“—effects can be most unpleasant, although not uncommon.” Hannibal paused, sensing a shift in the room. “Will? Have you returned to us?”

Will felt as if he might collapse, knees trembling as he swayed on his feet. Hannibal stepped lightly forward and gripped Will by the shoulder. Holding him there, Hannibal swept a steady hand across Will's forehead. He brushed aside a damp mop of fringe, then traced down the side of Will's face, jaw and neck, lithe fingers coming to rest at the pulse point. Will tested a swallow, although his mouth was dry. He could feel Hannibal's fingers move against his bobbing throat, concern playing in his eyes as he searched Will's, assessing.

“How did—” Will's tongue was fat and slow, throat harsh and clogged. Will let out a series of weak coughs that caught in his unsure stomach.

“You arrived at my doorstep quite alone and disoriented, and I myself am curious as to what brought you to me in this condition.”

Will moved to apologize, but he was quickly silenced.

“Never apologize for coming to me, Will. I am grateful that you found your way here even in this state. Know you are always welcome in my home, no matter the hour, and I will do my best to help you in any way I can.”

Hannibal looked sincere and serene as he tended to Will, a small smile playing on his lips as he checked his vitals. Being held by sure, steady hands in the comfort of his friend's open

home was a balm. The cold and jealous moon peeking through darkened kitchen windows was the only witness to Hannibal's practiced ministrations.

"Thank you, Dr. Lecter," Will finally managed, allowing his eyes to fall shut while he worked to slow his breathing and regain himself, grounded in the warm, careful touch of Hannibal's fingers. The familiar scent of clean cologne filled the deeper part of his lungs, chasing out the miasma of heavy night air. Will felt remarkably thirsty and slow, his muscles unthawing in the neat kitchen, warming under Hannibal's careful attention.

Hannibal hummed, satisfied that Will had not suffered some grave injury out on his own in the cold night.

"There. No harm done." He smiled broadly and clapped Will on the shoulder, bringing him back to the present. "Come. Let's get you cleaned up, and then you can reveal what misfortune brought you to my kitchen this evening."

Will simply nodded and allowed Hannibal to guide him up the stairs and down new hallways to a large bedroom in the heart of his home. Hannibal carried the drink he had prepared for Will in one hand as he led them down the twisting path. In all his visits, Will had never ventured further than Hannibal's office and dining rooms, but here he was at god-knows-what hour of the morning, confused, exhausted, ashamed, but nonetheless grateful for Hannibal's hospitality.

In the new room, Hannibal set the mug on a table and indicated a stack of fresh clothes and a robe already laid out for Will's use on the edge of the bed. He then moved to prepare a bath in the adjoining room, allowing Will to peel away his sweat-soaked clothes in peace.

Will stood for several moments battling his haze and processing these instructions. His head felt like it had been emptied and stuffed with gauze. He felt made of it entirely. Gauzy. But soon the sound of water filling a tub wafted in from the open door and Will obeyed, moving to shuck his garments clumsily. Somehow his buttons had grown more complicated since he last fastened them. After a few minutes of struggle, Will managed to wiggle out of his soiled clothing with effort. The cool air made him shiver, and he quickly wrapped himself in the soft satin robe Hannibal had laid out, settling on the edge of the bed until he returned.

Still treading on the surface of his stupor, Will took in what he could of his surroundings. The room was appointed with dark carved wood furniture, oiled to a glossy sheen. Burgundy wallpaper textured with leaves and brambles coiled upward to brace layers of ornate molding topped by an intricate patterned ceiling. His eyes swept to the gold-framed mirror that hung across the room and he stared back at himself, seeing semi-clearly for the first time in perhaps days.

Will looked like hell.

Sweaty and unshaved, slumped and ragged – he was completely out of place in this ostentatious robe amid such finery. Set against the plush elegance of Hannibal's estate, Will appeared pale and weak. He wanted to slip away in shame before Hannibal returned to lavish more of his excellent care on Poor Mad Will. Snatch up his clothes and wade without a word back into the cold current of night that had pulled him here to hopeful safe harbor.

Will considered: what would be *more* rude? To quietly and mercifully relieve Hannibal of his messy, unstable presence... or stay put as the world's worst houseguest?

Letting this poised and capable man just a few months a friend tend him like an injured bird in the small hours of the morning while Will offered absolutely nothing in return was flatly unacceptable. Why should Hannibal put up with Will's lunatic behavior?

But Hannibal had accepted him so far, hadn't he? And Will had come here on his own. (Didn't he?)

Will reasoned that perhaps Hannibal always kept a room prepared with a neat little pile of fresh clothes for whatever filthy, deranged visitor (wearing Will's exact size) happened to chance by.

He sighed and scrubbed rough hands over his face, deciding to save the worst of this self-abuse for later when his battered brain could compose better insults to wound himself with. He was simply too wrung out and exhausted to entertain this line of thought any longer.

He calmed his mind by listening to the final splashes of water filling the tub, fragrant with whatever rare oils or potions Hannibal would insist upon using, then ventured a sip from the mug left steaming on the nightstand.

It was bitter and earthy, like Hannibal had made a thin broth out of handfuls of the forest floor. Unusual, although not wholly unpleasant. No doubt some delicacy Will had never heard of. He grunted through a few more swallows, grimacing as it licked the back of his throat, liquid heat spreading through his chest wall and settling in the hollow of his weak stomach.

"It's Chaga." Hannibal offered, re-entering the room and drying his hands on a towel. "A mushroom harvested from living trees and brewed into medicinal tea, prized for its healing properties. It can be a difficult flavor for some. But it comes with benefits, I assure you."

"It's not terrible." Will grimaced and took another swallow before setting the cup back down. "Honestly, I'd take anything warm right now. Even instant coffee." He managed what he guessed was a winning smile and tried to rub some life back into his eyes and face, glad for the easy conversation.

Hannibal beamed at Will and turned to rummage through a drawer.

"As your doctor for the moment, Will, I suggest you avoid caffeine. You've had enough stimulation for one night, I imagine. Even if the bulk of it has sunk out of view."

Will chuckled and pulled a face. "Is whiskey off the table, too?"

Hannibal smiled to himself as he removed small bottles and a carefully wrapped bundle from the drawer.

"For you? I admit to keeping a private reserve for such occasions. But forgive me if I stick with wine myself for the evening." He closed the drawer and turned in a neat circle to face

Will. "Now, finish your tea."

Will obeyed and bravely swallowed down the rest of his medicine. He replaced the mug on the table with effort and settled back against the headboard, slowly arranging his limbs and robes. Looking at nothing, Will took himself back through the fog to his last recollections on a lonely shore.

"Last thing I remember, I was standing with Jack."

"At a crime scene?"

"Yes. We were in the mountains, at a lake in Virginia. A little inlet in a remote part of the forest. A briar of limbs was planted along a stretch of shore like trees. Hands open, reaching toward the sky."

Hannibal reflected, considering the scene. "We all find ourselves reaching for the unreachable at times. Stretching toward something we cannot truly grasp, but desire to touch nonetheless. What was it about this crime scene that set you so adrift?"

Will rested his head against the headboard and let his eyes fall shut. He was exhausted and still fuzzy around the edges. The scene from the lake swam before his vision and he breathed it in fully. Rows and rows of arms carefully planted in the silt, hands posed like an artist's study reaching stiffly upwards. Fingers contorted to clutch at damp air, their sickly trunks swaying in the wind as if they could be toppled roots-and-all like young trees in a storm. He saw himself planting and placing, posing the fingers one by one, then standing back to admire his lovely work.

Hannibal's clear voice cut through Will's vision. "Do you think it was the Ripper?"

Will blinked his eyes open to the dim light of Hannibal's bedroom.

"Hm? No. This, uh," He coughed weakly. Will's tongue was thick and heavy in his mouth as he spoke. "No, it's not the Ripper."

Concentration creased Will's face as he recalled the unsettling scene at the beach. "This killer tends his victims like prized roses. Cultivates them. Cares about their... growth."

"Then it's likely he knows them, and has seen them reach and struggle for something more. Admires them for it, possibly even helped in their journey. Perhaps his admiration is what inspired such a grisly memorial."

Will sat silently, turning this thought over in his mind.

Hannibal continued, "The question is, did his victims get what they truly wanted? Or are they still reaching?"

Will shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut again, the edges of a headache forming. "I don't know. Probably not. Why help them succeed, if only to kill them in the end?"

"I cannot say for sure, but several reasons come to mind."

Will sighed and gave in to the ebb of his headache, pressing a hand over his eyes where it was sharpest. “All right, then. Please. Enlighten me, doctor.”

“He could be celebrating their journey’s happy end. Or reveling in his hand in helping achieve it. A memorial to all of their wonderful victories together.”

Will frowned, trying to make these pieces fit without success.

“No, he cares about what happens to them. If he could help, he would. These victims died before they got what they wanted.”

“Then it’s possible his desire to witness their struggle outweighed the benefit of these victims achieving their dreams. Perhaps if they succeeded, our killer would lose his prime seat at the theatre of their transformation.”

Will opened his eyes to regard Hannibal, processing his meaning.

“He wanted to preserve them mid-change?”

“The searching itself is often the most valuable part of a journey. The intensity and effort of our wanting gives weight and meaning to the outcome. Easily won trinkets provide the least amount of pleasure in the end.”

Will searched for a more earthly explanation. “Maybe he didn’t agree with what they wanted? He thinks they’re reaching for something they can’t have... or don’t deserve. Could this be punishment?”

“Far be it from us to pass judgment on another’s desires, Will. But perhaps he did try to give these victims a higher aspiration than what they scrambled after in life.”

“He thinks he’s helping them,” Will mused.

“We all want what’s best for our friends. Even if they don’t see it at first.”

Hannibal held Will’s gaze for a moment.

“What *I* want,” Will said slowly, “is to take a bath.”

Hannibal smiled again. “Then we are in agreement. Come.”

Will moved to the edge of the bed and allowed Hannibal to brace an arm around his side, heaving him up on still unsteady feet. Shuffling slowly through the doorway, Will was led to a large and inviting standing tub filled with fragrant water. Hannibal paused there, choosing his next words with care.

“If you would prefer, Will, I can wait outside. But I would like to remain close, in case you have another episode.”

Oh. Will’s brain stuttered, then sped through the fractal of possibilities before him. He hadn’t thought that far ahead. The idea of anyone seeing him exposed and vulnerable – especially

Hannibal, who was by now a reliable feature in his most enjoyable dreams – sent him into a mild panic.

Will wobbled slightly, thoughts and memories and senses crashing together in a dizzying flood as he worked to separate what was *real* and *now* from the phantoms and fantasies replaying in his mind.

Hannibal's arm, firm and solid across his back. That was real. Cool, glossy tile under his feet. Yes. That was real, too. Hannibal's reassuring warmth pressed into his side. Fragrant bath oil. Heady cologne. Yes. Yes. Yes. Will's pulse hammered in his ears and his vision grew dim.

Hair pulled tight in a fist. A broad hand squeezing his neck, breath shallow. Cock achingly hard, straining with need. Blessed friction and pressure, waves of pleasure, the promise of relief. The taste of copper wet on his tongue and filling his mouth. Fingers pressing, pulling just there and there and – God!

Will shook his head, chasing the visions away.

Hannibal's eyes were bright and questioning, searching him for an answer. (Yes?) He had to get a grip. NOW.

Will breathed slowly and thought of boat motors, squashing down his overactive imagination. Even for a sane man, there were at least a dozen reasons why this was a bad idea. But Will calmed himself and swallowed his pride, choosing to be clean and safe instead of filthy and possibly concussed if he was unlucky enough to slip on slick tile in his foggy state.

"No. It's fine. I mean... yes. Yes, I'd like you to stay. Please."

Hannibal released a fraction of the tension held in his shoulders and looked at Will with soft eyes.

"I, um." Will played for time as he un-rattled himself. "I still don't feel quite like myself. And I appreciate the company."

"Of course," Hannibal said simply. "I'll stay as long as you'll have me."

And that was that.

Will pieced himself together and shrugged out of his robe, allowing Hannibal to navigate him into the bath as modestly as possible under the circumstance. One leg over and in, then the next. The water was milky and slick with whatever concoction Hannibal had prepared for him. The gentle scent of pine (and something like black pepper?) with layers of sharp citrus and eucalyptus filled the air. Not overpowering, but just enough. The sides of the tub were high and slippery, so Hannibal kept a steady hand on Will's back and shoulders until he was fully seated in the water.

He exhaled, that hurdle passed, and felt his muscles begin to warm and unwind, joints and shoulders singing their thanks. He cupped a few handfuls of bathwater over his head and

chest, then eased back fully into the cloudy tub, enjoying the feeling of tension lancing from his submerged body.

Hannibal knelt close by, simply waiting, his eyes glassy and fixed on Will.

Noticing, Will chuckled nervously at the attention and decided to choose conversation over silence.

“It’s, ah, been forever since I’ve had a bath.”

“Yes, you smell like it, too,” Hannibal quipped, breaking his stare and beginning to roll up his shirtsleeves.

“Oh, no,” Will laughed genuinely now, relaxing at the banter. “I mean I haven’t used a bathtub since I was a little kid. Pretty much the only time I’m surrounded by water now is in a stream or a lake. Fishing, not bathing. Except I did fall in once, by accident. Ice fishing.” Will swirled a hand in the warm water. “This is much nicer.”

It was Hannibal’s turn to chuckle. “I’ll wager the only thing you caught that day was a cold.”

“Mm. Yeah, a cold with a side of fresh hell from my father. Came back that night half blue. Took hours to get the feeling back in my toes.”

While they spoke, Hannibal unwrapped his kit from the bureau and plucked a small scrub brush and file from the neat pile of instruments. He took up Will’s hand from the side of the tub and turned it over in his palms gently, examining. Then he set to work polishing the grime from Will’s pinked skin and under his fingernails, applying ointment to scrapes and nicks that speckled his hands and forearms.

“I’ve never fished, myself,” Hannibal offered. “Only a small amount of hunting as a boy. Small game. Pheasants. Rabbits.”

Will closed his eyes, letting Hannibal do his work undisturbed and easing into conversation that took away the sting of his awkwardness. He was glad to surrender himself to Hannibal’s attention.

“It’s about reading the water,” Will continued. “Waiting for the right time of day or season. Knowing what bait to use for what fish... I think you’d make an excellent fisherman, Dr. Lecter. If I could convince you to come in the water with me.”

A wry smile crossed Will’s face and he sank a bit deeper in the warm bath. His mouth was getting lazy as he grew more comfortable. He was edging dangerously close to flirting, and he knew it.

Hands finished, Hannibal replaced them in the water and moved to where Will’s head lay. He lingered a moment to observe the flickering pulse beneath Will’s jaw, bending a fraction closer to scent his hair, not yet completely cleansed of his journey’s sweat and dust. Hannibal’s face flashed brief concern, but quickly smoothed into a cheerful shape.

“You’ve completely sold me, Will. You’ll have to give me lessons one day.”

The corner of Will's mouth twitched into a smile. "Yeah, 'course. It's a date."

Hannibal took a palmful of shampoo from a small bottle and worked the product into a creamy lather before gently raking his fingers through Will's damp curls. Eyes still closed, Will hummed in pleasure.

"S'wonderful," Will mumbled. He was feeling serene and sleepy, luxuriating in Hannibal's care. Careful fingers rubbed slow circles into Will's scalp, washing away the worst of the day and any evidence of his mysterious journey.

Will thought of how he would carefully bathe a new stray when it wandered to his lonely house in the dead of night. Did they feel comforted and loved like this? Is that what made them want to stay?

You can feed an animal and soothe them with soft words. Offer the excitement of play, companionship, even a warm place to sleep. But the comfort of touch is binding. Will cherished every scrap of it he was offered, it came so infrequently. He would have been more than content with kitchen-table hospitality. But this... this felt like worship in the highest order. Unearned, unexpected, and wholly unimaginable. Surely he was dreaming again.

Will's body felt heavy and slow, his mind loose and unfurled. Hannibal unthreaded his nimble fingers from Will's hair, earning an involuntary groan of disappointment.

Hannibal cradled Will's head, heavy on his neck. "Stay with me, Will. You've had a long night, but don't slip away yet."

"I feel slippery," Will mumbled.

"Yes, you do. But only for a moment more."

With a shower head, Hannibal carefully rinsed the suds from Will's curls and opened the taps to warm the cooling water. Will was finally dozing, or close to it, breathing slow and steady, lips slightly apart. Rivulets of water dripped down his neck, forming small pools in the dips and valleys of his shoulders and chest. Hannibal settled at the side of the tub and dipped a hand in the water to test its temperature again. Satisfied, he turned off the taps and settled into the quiet of the room.

It was rare to see Will so unguarded and peaceful. Hannibal drank in the sight of him as long as he was allowed. He had said it before, wrapped in formality and buried in quick conversation, but he chanced to echo the thought more plainly while he had the opportunity.

"I'm grateful that you came to me, Will."

Will slowly opened his eyes, rousing from half-sleep to regard Hannibal. His face was sincere and open. *"I'm grateful that you came to me."* He turned this admission over in his mind. Its quiet peculiarity rang like a bell falling down stairs, singing alarm on each step. *"I'm grateful that you came."*

Hannibal was... *thankful* that Will had shown up, completely unannounced, out of sorts, and out of his mind. Will could barely make sense of how it was he had come to be here, much less why Dr. Lecter would treat him like such a precious thing and be glad for doing so.

There was no motive he could detect for Hannibal's attention, on this night or others. Was it pity? Professional concern for his safety as a colleague?

Will's brainless body had wandered far in the dark of night and landed here. Was that unsettling? Absolutely. Cause for a full spa treatment? Absolutely not.

Admittedly, Hannibal had a taste for the unusual... but Will didn't consider himself special. Or funny. Or talented. He wasn't refined or accomplished. He wasn't even particularly handsome. He was nothing like Hannibal or the kind of person he would expect him to enjoy associating with. In Will's opinion, he was just barely normal enough to be allowed in regular society. A curiosity at best, fit only for collectors or scavengers. He belonged in a museum... or a junkyard. A pile of odd parts that never quite fit together and ran best when kicked. Will looked human, but he lived within the margins of that definition. And, he realized in that moment, he had no one else that he could truly call a friend.

"I'm grateful that you came to me, Will."

Will's throat felt tight as he answered honestly, "Where else would I go?"

"You have everywhere else to go."

Will shook his head. "My world is small."

"Not as small as you think. You could have gone to Alana, or to Jack. He was much closer. You could have gone back home, or to any other place in this world that called out to you when you left your forest of reaching arms to roam alone in the night."

"I'm pretty sure Alana or Jack would have me institutionalized if I dropped in like this." Will meant it as a joke, but he realized it held some truth. "Even if they didn't... I feel safe here. It's one of the only places left I do feel safe. Like I'm free in some way."

"You are, Will. But even free animals can find themselves trapped in very large cages, both real and imagined. Wolves run free in the wild, but their wilderness is shrinking. Gobbled up by houses and roads and all the civilized places. Their prey all fled. No sheltered place to sleep or raise young." Hannibal paused and considered the eddying water for a moment. "But what if wolves decided to take full advantage of their freedom and wander where they wanted without restriction?"

"You're asking... what if *wolves* lived in Baltimore?" Will laughed honestly, glad to be on a lighter topic of conversation.

Hannibal smiled, mirroring his mirth. "It's just a thought."

Will sat up a bit straighter in the tub, glad of the shift in the room's mood.

“All right, why not? Well, any wolves in the city would have to be careful if they want to survive, even if they’re only active at night. Hunt carefully to avoid being noticed, or find other food between hunts. Maybe get help from sympathetic humans...”

“Eat out of cans? Blend in to appear like a stray dog? Survive off table scraps from kindly old ladies?”

Will shook his head. “No, that just sounds like another kind of cage to me. Only smaller.”

“To me, as well. I don’t imagine a wolf would enjoy pretending to be a lapdog for very long, even if it kept him safe and fed. His wild instincts would be too strong.”

“And all those kindly old ladies would find out on their own, eventually. Then I’d have to investigate a strange epidemic of grandma-eating home invaders with sharp, pointy teeth.”

“*‘All the better to eat you with, my dear.’*” Hannibal chuckled. “So what becomes of the Big Bad Wolf, who is by all accounts *free* and driven by wild blood, but still caught in the trap of a polite society that means to exterminate him for simply following his nature?”

“Well, you can see what happened.” Will grew somber. “The only thing close to a wolf around here are coyotes or possibly dogs that interbred, but still carry a small part of their wild instinct. I think I was feeding a half-wolf that was coming around a few summers back... but I never got close enough to get a good look. I guess he finally moved on.”

Hannibal’s face danced with amusement. “You meant to catch a wolf for yourself? Have it live like the other dogs and sleep at the foot of your bed?”

“I’ve wanted one since I was a child.” Will admitted sheepishly. “But I know a true wolf wouldn’t be happy living with me, so it’s for the best.”

Hannibal’s lips still held a vague smile, but his eyes were serious. “If my opinion matters, Will, I believe you’d make an excellent wolf companion... if you aren’t eaten first.”

Will laughed again. “Thank you for that vote of confidence, Dr. Lecter.”

“Speaking of food, I think we had better get some breakfast in your belly and head back to your unpleasant lakeshore before Jack Crawford wonders where you’ve wandered off to.”

Will groaned in earnest while Hannibal collected fluffy, fresh towels from a cabinet. “Couldn’t I just sleep here?”

Hannibal grinned. “In the bath? No. You will only wake up cold and shivering like you’ve fallen again through the ice fishing, complete with blue toes to show for it.” He cast him a stern look. “Your father would be furious.”

“Mhmm. Well, I won’t tell him, then.”

“Jack would also be furious, which will be much worse,” Hannibal teased. “Now, come. Up.”

Puzzle With A Piece Missing

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal return to the scene. Questions swirl and a second attack is discovered.

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Full disclaimer: I have never been to Lake Moomaw or the George Washington National Forest, so I'm supposing a lot with the details. Let me know if I'm way off-base here.

XD

“We should get our story straight before we arrive.”

Hannibal’s car crunched slowly up the mountain path leading to the lake and cabins.

“You mean my alibi?” Will stared out the passenger window, scanning for deer hidden in the tree line.

“Yes and no. It will help lessen Jack’s worry if we appear to have a plan when we arrive. That it was not an out-of-body experience or divine intervention that summoned us both back here.”

“I don’t know what the hell it was.” Will looked sullen and exhausted. “I should have just walked back. Saved you the trouble.”

“Then I would have walked with you, if only to make sure you returned in one piece.”

Hannibal gave a reassuring smile that said *everything is going to be all right*. Will calmed a little, but the tension in his body still grew by the minute.

Will had enjoyed his time with Hannibal immensely. His clothes were clean and soft. His freshly washed skin still smelled of citrus and pine. His belly was full of fussily prepared egg and sausage breakfast. And despite Hannibal’s urging that he should sleep on the way, Will passed the time chatting about whatever caught their fancy – putting aside the impulse to theorize about the horrible bastard whose murders had forced him so far from home to begin with.

Setting out, Hannibal had balked at the distance Will covered and the lengthy drive ahead. Lake Moomaw was about 200 miles from Baltimore. It didn’t make sense. Will couldn’t explain it. But Hannibal didn’t question him, and he was grateful for that. Hannibal simply punched the coordinates into his GPS and navigated down narrow city streets until he hit the highway.

The sun had just begun to break as they entered George Washington National Forest. Will guided them up winding paths toward the clutch of cabins that served as the staging area for the FBI's investigation.

Will ran through the mental calculus, following the spider web of possibilities to secure any loose ends before the coming onslaught of questions. Jack would not like that he left. It would concern him greatly, no matter how this was spun. Even in an emergency, Will should have at least told Jack where he was going. Basic cub scout forest safety shit.

He examined the chain of evidence he knew so far:

Fact #1: Will didn't drive up here originally, he rode with Jack. That meant he had either been snatched from his bed, walked out of the wilderness by himself in the moonlight, or "borrowed" a vehicle without permission and lost it. Bad all the way around.

This was made worse by Fact #2: Will didn't have any personal items with him. His wallet, keys, and phone were hopefully still back in his cabin... but that meant he couldn't make or receive calls, much less purchase a bus or plane ticket, call a cab, or buy gas. There was no accounting for how he had traveled such a distance. *Unless...*

Will's stomach sank. He hoped to God he hadn't taken a car.

Last, there was Fact #3: Dr. Lecter himself. Will couldn't have called him up here. And even if he did, there was no cause for Will to go missing in the first place. This couldn't be passed off as summoning reinforcements or a sudden need for emergency therapy. (Although he probably needed it.)

No, Hannibal's arrival could most neatly be explained by his completely and totally unhinged behavior. Of course Hannibal would return Will after scooping him up from the depths of blind madness and fortify him with strong tea, new clothes, antiseptic, and a tasty breakfast. But then Will would have to admit to all of his worrying behavior in full, both to himself and Jack.

Why had he abandoned his team and their work at the shore? What compelled him to Hannibal's home in the dead of night? As sure as a compass needle pulls toward its magnetic north, Will had somehow felt his way in the muddy dark, drawn from his cabin to Hannibal's side. These were questions he desperately wanted to avoid for at least a little while longer.

He chewed over these facts to find the least absurd and most merciful solution.

"What if," Will said slowly, "you drop me off at the ranger station. I'll walk down and tell Jack I just got up early and wanted to check out some trails. Got lost. Hitched a ride from a local. He'll be annoyed, but he won't have to know I teleported hundreds of miles and dragged you up a mountain in the middle of the night."

"And save all the fun for yourself? Send me home just like that? Will, I thought we were friends."

Will warmed at the affirmation of Hannibal's friendship, but deflected out of habit. "Just trying to minimize the damage I caused. To myself, the investigation, and to *both* our reputations."

"Personally, I think an alien abduction is more believable." Hannibal made a show of scanning the horizon.

Will groaned. "I should have slept. I can't think, I'm sore all over..."

"Well, at least you smell nice." Hannibal offered a half-smile and glanced at Will, who had begun to work the muscles in his neck and shoulders with hands full of nicks and scars.

Will had arrived riddled with cuts and abrasions on his face, arms, legs, and back. They had healed quickly, though, almost fading to white lines before morning. Hannibal considered these injuries silently for a moment, then offered, "Why not tell the truth? Or an edited version of it."

"Because I can't remember *anything*. The last thing I need is Jack worrying that I've finally cracked. That I'm... brain damaged. Or worse."

"If I'm being honest, I am mildly concerned myself. If I were Jack, it would ease my mind knowing you have a competent doctor close at hand in case you have another episode."

Will set his jaw and stared straight ahead, simmering under the surface. He liked the idea of spending more time with Hannibal, even working the scene together... but *concern* was not the feeling he wanted to evoke. He resented being babysat. His doom spiral kicked in full-force. Why couldn't he just be *normal*? Cool. Put together. A normal, cool, collected FBI investigator who didn't talk with corpses, spend every night sweating terror into his sheets, or wander brainlessly through the countryside.

"Plus, I think Jack would love to have another opinion on our mystery arborist." Hannibal looked at Will, rousing him from his self-abuse. His lips were held even, with barely concealed mirth hiding in their corners.

Will mimed shock and horror. "Oh, Jesus. No. Hannibal! Is that what this is about?"

"We make a great team. Jack thinks so, too."

"Yes, but... OK. OK." Will raked a hand through his dark mop of curls and sighed. "So... what? I just fancied a walk, wandered into town and *happened* to find you there?"

"Yes, why not?" Hannibal grinned. "Or you called me by payphone. Perhaps you knew I was going to be in the area for a conference."

They were getting close to the turn-off now, and Hannibal was having an excellent time watching Will squirm toward an answer in the seat beside him.

"Hannibal, this is a national forest. *One million acres* of federally protected land. What kind of conference—"

“The pursuit of psychiatry has brought me to stranger places.” Hannibal was *reeeeeeally* enjoying himself.

Will shook his head in exasperation. “You’re the worst. You know that?”

Their headlights shone on the carved wood sign marking the branch in the path that led to the cabin area. A rumpled park ranger waved them through a police barricade blocking the drive into the deeper part of the forest. Will fixed his glasses and rolled down the window to greet the ranger with as much composure as he could muster.

“Good morning, my name is Will Graham with the FBI. And this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter. I requested that he join us to assist with profiling today.”

Will shifted uncomfortably in his seat, testing out the lie in his body. He could see police lights further down the path, bouncing off tree trunks. He hoped they weren’t for him. Hannibal produced an ID from his wallet and leaned across Will to hand it to the ranger with a disarming smile, looking him directly in the eyes.

“Good morning, officer.”

“Morning, Dr. Lecter, Mr. Graham.” He glanced briefly at the badge and handed it back through the window. “The officers down there will be real glad to see you made it back all right. They’ve been up and down this hill all morning. One of the guys thought a Bigfoot might’ve got you!” The ranger chuckled to himself, tickled at his own joke.

Will did his best to mask the queasy feeling in his gut with a huge laugh to show how ridiculous the idea was. “No, no. I just couldn’t sleep and needed better reception to call Dr. Lecter, so I headed to a gas station down the way.” Will nodded vaguely toward the main drive. He was pretty sure they passed one several miles back.

“Yeah, service here is pretty spotty.” The ranger nodded to himself, then let out a low whistle. “But jeez, that’s a hell of a walk. We’ve got a line at the ranger’s station. Next time you need to call out, just knock. We don’t need anyone else going missing around here, OK?”

Will let out a held breath in relief. “Thank you so much, mister...?”

“Allen. But just call me Roy. If you need anything else, give me a shout.” Roy tapped the roof of the vehicle twice signaling the conversation was over and returned to his post behind the barricade. He waved Hannibal through, pointing down the gravel path to the campsites dancing with police lights.

“See?” Hannibal looked smug at their small victory. “Piece of cake.”

“That was the easy part.” Will stared miserably at the forest, watching trees iced with morning frost tick by, counting down his doom.

“Right now you’re wishing a Bigfoot *had* snatched you out of bed. Dragged you down to the shore and plucked off your arms for its pretty little garden.”

Will gave a snort and thought about that for a moment.

“I thought Bigfoot was supposed to be vegetarian. *And* afraid of humans.”

“Any being can be pushed to defend itself. The battle for survival can sharpen the teeth of even the meekest animal. Perhaps he sensed some threat he might be discovered, his world upended, and took action against it.”

“Oh, I thought we were chasing an *empathetic* killer. Who knows and loves his victims.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I am a creature that dwells in the city, surrounded by people. I am accustomed to their noise and smell. Out here...” Hannibal paused, listening to the car rumble through the forest. “I haven’t spent time in a place like this since I was very young.” He let this thought hang for another long moment and finished humbly, “It’s a very different kind of life.”

Will nodded. “If I was a Bigfoot, I think I’d do everything I could to stay hidden.”

“Would you be content like that? Alone, unknown, hiding among the trees?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a Bigfoot.”

“No, you’re not.” Hannibal answered solemnly. “Do you know what you are?”

The road curved sharply and opened up onto a hilly embankment close to the shore dotted with small wood cabins, police vans, and people going in and out dressed in neat black jackets. A powerfully built man carrying irritation in his shoulders caught sight of Hannibal’s approaching vehicle. He spoke a word into his walkie-talkie and made a beeline for the car as it parked.

“Yeah, I know what I am.” Will sighed. “In trouble.”

Will opened the door and stepped out with a straight back, facing the firing squad with dignity. The man stopped in front of the car and regarded the duo with a tight smile. His eyes passed over Will coolly, then he turned to address Hannibal first with genuine warmth.

“Good Morning, Dr. Lecter. Glad to see you made it here in one piece.”

“Likewise, Jack. I’m sorry to drop in unannounced, but I came bearing a gift.”

Jack looked back at Will and crossed his arms in a stance of solid authority. His voice was soft, but firm and full of reproach, like he was scolding a beloved pet who had chewed his favorite shoes under the bed.

“Care to explain, Will? You’ve caused quite a scene here.”

All the mental pathways led to dead ends. Will couldn’t obfuscate enough to throw Jack. He would see through him instantly. He buckled and chose the simplest solution: Hannibal’s suggestion of honesty.

Half-truth it is, then.

“Needed some perspective. Couldn’t sleep. Called on Dr. Lecter for support.”

Avoiding the “I” in these statements, Will resisted attaching responsibility to himself fully. It didn’t go unnoticed.

“*You*,” Jack pronounced the word slowly with his full chest, “vanished without telling anyone where you were going or why. *You* abandoned the crime scene and your team. To meet a civilian who had no clearance in this matter!” Jack’s gaze didn’t leave Will, who was studying the water intensely. “No offense, Dr. Lecter.”

“None taken.”

Will reset his head on his shoulders and turned to face Jack. His expression smoothed to appear open and sincere.

“I’m sorry, Jack. It won’t happen again.”

“Do you need to go home?” Jack measured his voice, concern rounding its sharp corners. “Are you able to continue here?”

Will’s tone was even and steady, like he was reading from a sheet. “I’m all right, Jack. Just took a little walk. Cleared my head. That’s all.”

Jack nodded, still searching his face. “You *just* took a *little* walk.”

The forensic team was gathering nearby and glancing in their direction, speaking quietly in a semi-circle. Jack decided to pocket this chastisement for later.

“We’re not done talking about this,” he said with finality, “but I am glad you’re here.” Jack turned to face Hannibal. “We could use another set of eyes.”

“I’m happy to lend a hand, or my eyes. Will filled me in on a few of the details.”

“Well get ready, because there’s more.”

Jack turned walked back to the group, pulling the pair with him in his wake. Their shoes crunched soberly on the gravel path leading to the cabins, punctuated by the occasional crisp snap of twigs. The air around the lake held water. It was saturated with cool morning mist and muffled the distant call of birds, warning each other against the intrusion. “*There are strangers in the woods*,” they said. “*Our woods*.”

Will let Jack’s silence percolate through him. The buzz and energy of the campsite stood in sharp relief to his solid presence. Tension, curiosity, and hushed panic hung thick in the air. Like a bloodhound, Will alerted to the disordered motion, shuffling feet, nervous postures, and averted eyes of the rest of his team. A shiver ran up his body from his calves to the hackles of his neck and shoulders, new information flowing in, saturating him, getting ready to squeeze out conclusions like an over-wet sponge. Will focused on the steady task of putting one foot in front of the other as he soaked in the emotions swirling around him. Something else happened here. Something bad.

They approached the team who straightened up and tried hard to look as if they weren't talking about anything just now, only awaiting orders, sir. Thankfully, Jack barked them out as soon as he reached the group.

"Zeller, Price. Sweep the trails. I want every stick, leaf and pinecone accounted for."

Price scampered off without protest. Zeller pulled up his eyebrows and followed, muttering a quiet, "Good luck," as he passed by. He was clearly relieved to be on trail duty.

"Katz, show Will the campsite and *keep an eye on him*. Dr. Lecter, you're with me."

What?

Will's brain crashed to a stop in a bizarre instant panic.

Jack was taking Hannibal away!

In all his calculations, Will never considered the possibility that Jack might separate them. It was like pulling off Will's legs to interrogate them independently. The idea was utterly absurd. A primal, territorial corner of his brain screamed at the unfairness of it. *He can't – they were like one being!*

Will vaguely registered that the fact he was having these thoughts at all was just as distressing as the feelings they conjured. He tried to tamp them down, but his eyes fumbled for Hannibal's, wildly telegraphing distress. His heart was a trapped bird dashing itself against the bars of his ribcage, pumping blood in weak and erratic spurts that barely reached his brain. He felt disoriented and unreasonably angry.

"Do something!" The bird shrieked. *"Take me, too!"*

Hannibal's eyes found Will's immediately and held him there with a strange intensity. Moments spun into multitudes. Hannibal's energy – steady, soothing, strong – poured through his eyes into the space between them, enveloping him. The panic in Will's body ebbed, replaced by waves of warm comfort. Hannibal's amber eyes were deep and vast. Will stood fascinated into stillness like a deer transfixed by the lamp of an oncoming train. He allowed himself to relax and soothe, restored in his sight.

Will had felt this before. It was like being draped in his father's heavy coat. Like being dipped into a warm tub with herbs and oils. It felt like being carried in from the cold and folded neatly into bed, tucked into the hollow of someone's chest, wrapped in limbs and held still. *I'm here*, this feeling said. *Everything is under control. You are safe and loved.*

Will's breathing slowed. His skin sang in a sort of rosy euphoria. He could have languished in this blissful feeling for eternity... but then it was gone in an instant. Hannibal turned and broke the spell.

Blinking back to life, Will watched Hannibal follow Jack toward the water, his back straight and solid. Will's brain felt weirdly fuzzy and slow. The warm, blissful, fortifying feeling had drained from him, leaving an echoing emptiness behind.

Will looked at the ground to steady himself. It had rained and it was muddy. Hannibal would ruin his nice shoes.

“—had to scrub toilets for two weeks.”

Beverly was talking. Will removed his glasses and pressed a palm to his eyes. “Sorry, what?”

“I *said* you got off easy. Once I snuck out of my bunk at summer camp to go party with some cute boys from town. When I got back, I had to scrub toilets for two weeks. At least my mom never found out. Camp director did me a solid.” She cocked her head and looked at Will with obvious amusement. She was enjoying teasing him. “It was worth it, though.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Beverly shrugged and grinned. “No reason.”

They began walking east into the woods, steering down a new path Will hadn’t gone down before. They took the twisting trail until a fork appeared, an orange blaze leading along the lake’s edge. It was wilder here, with logs and brambles obscuring the footpath until it disappeared entirely. Will decided not to ask where they were going. He was sure to find out soon enough, and it was likely something unpleasant. Why else would Jack send him there?

They passed the time alternating between light chatter and crunching down the trail in companionable silence. Beverly had an easy way of letting Will be alone together. He was grateful she was with him, and appreciated her for more than that. She was a good reflection device and a smart investigator. She knew right from wrong, but followed her own mind on a case by case basis. And she didn’t shy away from uncomfortable truths.

“What happened last night?”

Will hesitated and fell back to the vague explanation he gave Jack.

“I couldn’t sleep. Took a walk.”

“So you *walked* back to Baltimore. To see your psychiatrist. In the middle of the night.”

Will laughed off that suggestion. “No! No, that would be... crazy.” Will gathered himself and tried to be as cool as possible. “I just needed to clear my head. Walked around. Got a little lost.”

“...And Dr. Lecter just happened to find you out here?”

“Ah, no. I asked him for help.”

“Not me. Not Jack. You went to him.”

Will just nodded.

“That’s a long way to go for a friend.”

Will just walked in silence. What could he say to that? She was tweezing him open, bit by bit.

“Why’d you leave, anyway?” Beverly asked. “Case got you messed up?”

“I’m not sure.”

The two passed a few more minutes in silence.

“Did you at least have a good time?”

Will smiled a little. “You know what? I did.”

“Your hair looks nice.”

“Thanks, it’s a new shampoo.”

The two had left any semblance of a path long ago and walked along a stream threading slightly uphill. They stepped over branches and around puddles capped with thin sheets of ice. Coming up the side of an embankment, Will caught sight of a tarpaulin tied to one side of a tree, its loose ends flapping vaguely in the breeze. It obscured part of an off-kilter tent, its side collapsed and contents scattered all around a small clearing.

Beverly let Will walk ahead a few steps, watching him take in the scene.

It was in an entirely remote section of the forest far away from the ranger’s station and cabins. The whole area was in disarray. Clothing, boots, and packed items littered the ground. The tent had been caved in by some force that ripped through the fabric and collapsed the structure. A rain cover tarp had been hitched over the site, but two of its tethers had snapped leaving its corners flapping weakly. Food items were strewn down the side of the hill where a pack went rolling. There was a trace of animal musk in the air that Will couldn't quite place, but wasn't entirely unfamiliar.

Will took it all in. A feather of fear made him listen closely for the sound of creatures in the underbrush. It looked like an attack made by a large animal.

“A bear?” Bev asked.

Will ran his hands over deep gouges in a large tree, matching his fingers to the cuts. He spread them wide to slot into the wounds. They were made with claws. Strong and deep in the old bark, exposing tender green wood that weeped with new sap. He could make out at least 4 clear gashes that marred the trunk. Smaller branches nearby had been splintered with force. A large body had thrashed around this campsite.

“Kind of looks like a bear,” Will reasoned, “but it must have been pretty pissed off. Or hungry. It’s a little late in the season for bears.”

Will pointed to the spread of debris and continued. “Food thrown around, but it wasn’t here for granola and jerky. Pack scattered, bags went flying. This was collateral damage. Not supper.”

He searched the ground for prints and found several sets. Bending down, he noted the faded marks of young deer hooves and a few small rodent prints – *opportunists*. But most clearly he saw the deep indentations of large, lobed pads tipped with claws that now pooled with melting frost.

“These aren’t from a bear. They’re smaller, but deep and heavy. Pad shape looks more like a very large dog or... maybe a wolf?” Will frowned. “But the gate is wrong. And there shouldn’t be any wolves here.” He eyeballed the distance between marks and looked up again at the tree’s shredded bark from where he knelt. Too high, even if the creature was standing on two legs to reach that far up the trunk.

“Thing had a hell of a reach.”

“That’s what Jimmy said. He couldn’t tell what it was, either. Said maybe some kind of huge mastiff went nuts and crashed the tent. Rabies?”

Will scanned for more tracks. A few boot marks had been preserved that seemed to match the soles of the abandoned shoes. There were also bare footprints pressed into the mud of varying shapes and sizes. Animal and human tracks overlapped and mingled, making odd shapes in the soft soil. Some were clearly made by a man and led away from the site toward the river. Others were marred and distorted by the animal tracks, seeming to mesh together and form hybridized marks. The leaves were spattered in places with blood. Will pushed aside an alarm of fear that there really was some sort of mad Sasquatch in the area, snatching intruders.

This was fantasy. Focus on the evidence.

The tent gaped open, ragged from where it had been torn into. There was one sleeping bag inside and not much else. The remaining contents of the tent – pack, clothes, shoes, hunting gear, kits with bandages and tools – had been thrown all across the small clearing.

“He was frightened. He ran. Barefoot.” Will paced the site, setting the pieces into place. “One camper, but multiple prints. At least two men were here.”

“Tent could fit two bodies. Maybe our guy brought a friend?”

“No. One backpack. One canteen. He came alone.” Will held out his hands over the white ashes left in a dug fire pit. They emitted the faintest amount of heat. This happened within the last 18 hours.

“Has the camper been found or identified?”

“No. Rangers said they never saw the guy. Anyone can use this area, they don’t have to check in or register. Just walk in, grab a spot, and enjoy the peaceful embrace of mother nature. We only found this place because we were looking for you.”

A chill passed through Will’s body, leaving his hair standing on end. Someone had to hear this. He had walked through the same woods last night. A whole team of FBI agents in barely insulated cabins slept less than a mile away. It was November, the off-season. But other campers were possibly staying in the woods, too. Hardcore outdoorsmen, hunters, or

survivalists willing to brave the forest at this time of year. Who could tell how many people were out in the woods? One million acres could hold a lot of hiding places.

“I noticed a lot by the main road for overnight parking. Any vehicles...?”

Beverly shook her head. Whoever he was, he was either long gone or they would find him half frozen.

Will stood and breathed, ready to put everything in place. His eyes closed slowly and he imagined a pendulum of light passing once, twice before his eyes. When he opened them again, he saw the campsite at medium distance, peeking between heavy trees. It was dark. *Cold*. The scent of roast potato and trout hung in the air. Faint embers in the fire pit left to die in the dark. The moon was bright and nearly full overhead. He could see the outline of the tent well.

What a pathetic little thing.

How easily it would tear...

Will crouched next to a giant canine. A beast with thick legs and a glossy black coat, hackles raised and teeth bared. It was beautiful. Frightening. Primal. He had great affection for this animal, and knew it intimately. They moved as one. Slowly, they both crept forward, stalking their prey.

A low growl filled the air with increasing volume and intensity, the forest absolutely silent around them. Little animals cowered in nooks and crannies. The heat emanating from this being in his flimsy, unnatural little cocoon was palpable. He could smell the intruder and feel him in his nose and on his tongue. He was disgusting, unnatural. He polluted the forest.

He doesn't belong here.

At once, Will and the beast rushed forward, all thought dissolving into liquid animal rage. There was only ripping fabric, splintering wood, claws, teeth, screams, mud, and hot, red blood in his mouth and on the ground.

This was justice.

Will gasped and opened his eyes into daylight, blinking and panting. He felt dizzy and sick.

“There was... an *animal*.”

“Knew that, genius.” Beverly looked at him like he might actually be brain damaged. “Please tell me you’re not profiling the wildlife.”

Will shook his head, still breathing hard.

“There was an animal and a man. They *hated him*. Both of them did, just for being here. In *their* woods. It was powerful. Hungry. Wild. Uncontrolled.”

“OK, so maybe a wolf, then. Someone’s pet? Or... I don’t know. What about the camper?”

“Ran toward the river. Might have made it across. Might not. We should, um.” Bile rose in the back of Will’s throat. “Check the water for a body or evidence.” Will’s head pounded. He was going to be sick. “I need to sit down.”

Beverly studied Will as he settled on a fallen log and tried to get ahold of the organs writhing inside him. Jack asked her to keep an eye on him, and she was examining him like a bug under a microscope. Will couldn’t risk unraveling any more than he already had.

“You were out here last night,” Beverly observed. “Did you hear anything?”

Will jerked his head no.

“This attack and the lake... do you think they’re connected?”

The pathology was so *different*. This was brutal. Unprovoked. This attacker didn’t know the victim. There was no deeper *motive*. He just wanted him **gone**. There was rage behind it, not the careful pruning and shaping of a world and the actors in it. The only glory to be found here was in the carnage created by teeth and claws. No design, only chaos.

Again, Will shook his head no. “It’s not our gardener.”

Beverly sighed and radioed Jack to report they were coming back and to send a team to search the river. If they didn’t find anything they could dredge the lake, but it was unlikely they would find much. If the vehicle was gone, too, then it was possible the victim had made it out somehow and fled. Bev noted they should check nearby hospitals and ask Mr. Allen if any other campers had gone missing.

As they walked back toward the cabins, Will couldn’t shake the unsettling feeling of animal eyes watching him from the trees, weighing his worthiness to walk the forest. Trees whispered to one another through entangled roots underground. They, too, fed on spilled blood and passed judgment here.

The Two Of Us Shall Go Together

Chapter Summary

Secrets are shared, while others remain hidden. The boys bring more to light than expected in the dark.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Will watched Hannibal and Jack pace down a familiar trail to the water's edge. They were walking at medium distance winding through the silent forest, the path obscured by trees and dappled in sunlight. Their figures flitted in and out of view, tree trunks interrupting and warping their forms. They were talking, but spoke the language of dreams, more intention and idea than words. It sounded funny.

Both said, "*Will, Will, Will,*" But in different colors and volumes. Jack said it in thick, smoky plumes of steel and sky blue that enveloped him like a swirling cloud. Hannibal said it in thin, delicate tendrils of red, purple, and gold that spun out behind him like a tether through the wood, colorful ribbons of light pulsing with energy and dancing in the wind.

Will paused from his work to watch them drift toward his pocket of lonely beach and the old worn cabin beside him. The arms he had planted there waved from the sand as they approached, like they were welcoming old friends. Jack shook a hand in greeting, the one with glossy red nails still wearing her wedding ring. Hannibal watched in amusement, then surveyed the shack with more interest, peering through its cracked, darkened windows. Will looked, too, standing beside him. Only dust, shadows, hunger, and nightmares lived inside.

Jack said, "*Murder, murder,*" and Hannibal turned toward the serene lake expanding before them, snaking out into inlets and channels that split the mountains. They sighed under the weight of the water that pushed them apart and drowned the dirt below. A small girl with white-blonde hair rose from the water and took Hannibal by the hand. She was pale and thin, wearing a simple nightdress and haloed in light.

Jack's radio crackled, and Beverly Katz's voice stuttered though. The three of them turned to leave as the planted arms took hold of Will and pulled him under the wet sand, filling his nose and mouth, burying him in darkness.

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A series of sharp knocks pulled Will gasping back to life. The water from his shower had long gone cold, and he was standing braced against the wall under the spit of it. More knocks came. Will felt the sand from his vision still filling his throat as he called out for time.

Will's head was full of bees. He barely remembered making the hard walk back to the cabins, but he must have made it on his own two feet. He now found himself back in his tiny bathroom, wracks of horror working their way through him, shaking out of his body. Shallow light streamed through the small curtained half-window with the yellow tint of what must now be afternoon.

Will fumbled off the taps and attempted to use an awful little towel to sop the water off his body with little success. It was the kind of towel that only worked once it was already wet. He let it fall in disgust and evaluated himself in the mirror without looking at his own eyes. He looked as tired and haggard as he felt. A day and a half with no sleep, he resisted the urge to curl up on the floor and instead pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms as quickly as he could, calling for just a minute more from his impatient visitor.

It was Jack, his dream-gentleness gone and replaced once more by annoyance and authority. He handed Will a bundle wrapped in paper and frowned at Will's wet hair dripping onto his bare shoulders.

"What's this?"

"Dinner. Roy made sandwiches."

A truck had been found outside Harrisonburg half submerged in a golf course water hazard. Local authorities traced the vehicle to an outdoorsman whose family indicated he had planned an extended trip to the forest area that held the ravaged campsite. Jack stood in the door of Will's cabin, eyes sweeping the room as he delivered this information along with a slightly soggy sandwich.

"It's our guy. Well, his truck, at least. No body, and no reports at any hospitals."

Will nodded and opened the wrapper. Cold ham, processed cheese, and a few ribbons of wilted lettuce. He was starving, but not for this. He replaced the paper with disgust and dropped it on a side table littered with case files. He was worn out, cranky, and had little leftover energy for pleasantries.

"Anything else?" Will demanded. "Blood? Prints? Trace?"

"It's been in the water a while, but PD found blood on the steering wheel and on the outside door frame. Zeller and Price are on the way, and I'm taking Beverly once she's done processing the campsite."

No plans for Will yet, then. At least he wasn't in cuffs. Guilt ate at him, the vision of "his" mauling danced behind his eyelids every time they shut.

Will rubbed his eyes. "Where's Hannibal?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

Will parted the thin curtain. Sure enough, a gaping hole sat between police vans where Hannibal's car should be. Will floundered here, squashing a rising wave of panic.

"He didn't come back with you?"

"We went to the lake and the campsite. One of the guys said they saw him walking toward your cabin. Nobody seems to have seen him leave." Jack's eyes lingered on a fine leather satchel perched on a chair beside the cabin's rumpled cot.

"I don't know what to tell you, Jack. I haven't seen him."

Will examined the sandwich again with disgust, hoping it would stir some desire in him. It did not.

"Maybe Hannibal went out for something a bit more elevated than gas station subs," Will groused, feeling sorry for himself. "If he did, I hope he brings back a doggie bag."

Jack flashed annoyance at Will's petulance and re-asserted his authority with a raised voice. "Last I remember, we have two active crime scenes, a missing person, and now Dr. Lecter is unaccounted for. I know you've had a long few days, but I need you, Will, to *wake up*." Jack dropped his voice to a whisper. "And be polite. I think Roy made these himself."

"I'm awake," Will soothed, "I'm awake. And I'm sorry. You're right."

Jack held him with his eyes until he felt Will was steady. "One more thing. I think Hannibal noticed something else at the beach. Something he's not sharing with me. I need you to find out what that is."

With that, Jack turned and paced out the door. Their initial investigation more or less complete, he would be on his way to shore up plans for getting back to civilization.

Will sighed and opened up the sandwich once again, just in case its contents had changed during his chastisement. He had marching orders to spend the night getting into Hannibal's head. He'd try but... Jack knew as well as he did that Hannibal only let you know what he wanted when he wanted. There was little use trying to push him, and Will wasn't exactly equipped for the task at present.

Somewhere in the room, Will's phone chimed to life. Notifications dripped in on the rare sliver of a passing signal. He rummaged around, following the cascade of dings to find it wedged under the far side of the bed. He scanned through dozens of missed calls and texts from the previous day.

Another ding: a text from Hannibal.

Hungry?

Will smiled and quickly tapped a reply, hoping his luck would hold through the shifting clouds.

God, yes. Are you in town? I'd kill for a steak.

God provides. Rest, Will. I'll be back soon.

- - -

Will's eyes closed. This was it. He was going to die. At least he was going to die happy.

"Hannibal, my *God*, you have to tell me what's in this marinade."

Will groaned around a succulent mouthful of kebab. To hell with sandwiches, *this* is what he'd been craving. Juicy red meat with the perfect balance of sweet, salty, and tangy flavors barely seared over an open flame. It was like he was truly tasting food for the first time. Hannibal smugly turned little skewers, glazing them once more with his magical mixture and adding them to a heaping platter between them.

"Never. You'll have no more use for me after all is revealed. Some secrets are best kept secret."

"This is honestly the best meal I have ever eaten. And you're making it in an absolutely awful cabin fireplace."

Hannibal added more wood to the cheerful fire and watched Will eat with pleasure. He noted the little pile of sticks, tomatoes, shallots, peppers, and mushrooms abandoned on the side of Will's plate and skewered more ingredients, substantially increasing his meat-to-vegetable ratio.

"You've had a very long day, Will. I'm sure even packed sandwiches would have satisfied in the end."

Will hummed dissent and plucked up another spear, tearing into the chunks of meat with relish. "Oh, no. This is ten hundred thousand times better."

"Ten hundred thousand?" Amusement danced on Hannibal's face, observing the wine-blush coloring his ravenous friend's cheeks.

"Ten *million* hundred thousand."

"Then my work here is done. And that calls for another toast." Hannibal moved the final morsels off the flame and refilled their glasses with the last of the wine, setting the empty bottle beside its brother. He offered cheers to a job well done.

Will was enormously grateful for this moment of quiet indulgence. At the end of another truly awful day, Hannibal had once again come to the rescue with good wine, an excellent meal, and warm companionship to soothe away his anxieties. It was beginning to seem like

the only enjoyable moments he was allowed to have were with Hannibal, tucked away from the world on the heels of some horror.

Will lounged in his chair beside the fire, loose and warm, sipping the last of his drink and eyeing Hannibal with liquid mischief.

"So really, what's your secret?"

Hannibal hummed. "You'll have to be more specific. I have a few."

"Well, That's the thing about secrets, right? If I knew, it wouldn't be a secret."

"Will, your present talent for philosophy is astounding. Ten hundred thousand times better than yesterday."

Will laughed, he was enjoying Hannibal's teasing.

"I meant the marinade. What's in it?"

"Oh, nothing special. Some tart winter berries I collected from the area. Fresh ginger, lemongrass, oyster sauce—"

"Where the *fuck*? – Oh, Excuse me."

Hannibal chuckled at the sudden alcohol-fueled explosion from Will.

"Yeah, no, *where the fuck* do you get lemongrass in the—"

"I brought a simple collection of herbs and—"

"*Oyster sauce?*"

"—a simple collection of herbs and other ingredients. You never know when a pinch of this or that might come in handy, and it's better to be prepared."

They shared a few more laughs over the absurdity of Hannibal's portable gourmet pantry and finished the last of their drinks. Hannibal grimaced at his empty glass and the two empty bottles.

"I should have thought to bring more wine, though. So much for being prepared."

"Actually Jimmy left most of a bottle of pretty bad whiskey," Will offered. "Brian said he couldn't bring an open bottle in the car... so we can always get into that if we're desperate."

"Then I will let you know when I am desperate."

Will hummed and felt something stir in him, the way Hannibal said it. He was all at once aware he may be acting very much out of line, but Hannibal seemed to be enjoying himself all the same. It felt good to relax into easy banter, loosen up their stitching just a little bit. He had been so closed and guarded for so long, it felt good to unravel. And he felt... different

these days, in a lot of ways. He was bolder. Bigger in the world, somehow. At least he felt that way around Hannibal. His confidence was almost contagious. It was intoxicating.

Hannibal studied Will for a long minute, assessing in his practiced way which tool to needle him with next.

"So what about you, Will?"

"Hmm?"

"I shared one of my secrets. What about one of yours?"

"I'm afraid I haven't made many marinades lately, sorry."

"I have enough recipes to last a lifetime... tell me something I don't know."

"Oh, is this never-have-I-ever?" Will leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, amused at the promise of a challenge.

"If you like, but unless we want to get into Jimmy Price's Terrible Awful No-Good Very Bad Whiskey, we are out of drink options... although, I'm sure you would be doing most of the drinking."

Will considered what he might possibly offer. Games aside, Hannibal was likely to guess a great many things about him without him saying. What would come as a surprise? Did he truly have secrets from him?

The only one that came to mind was the one Will swallowed every time he looked at Hannibal. That his affections for the man had grown like a seed in his heart, wrapping roots around his lungs and threading through his very veins. It happened so quickly he hadn't had the space to put proper words to the feeling. Day by day Will craved Hannibal's presence more and more, and to be something beyond his colleague, acquaintance, patient... whatever they were. Friend had a nice ring, but Will was greedy with Hannibal. He wanted all of him, always.

What was that called?

Hannibal was the first thing Will thought of in the morning, and the last thing at night. Even unconsciously, Will reached for Hannibal in his dreams. Perhaps it was just a crush, but he had experienced crushes before and this felt different. It felt... like home. Like he was walking in the dark his whole life and finally saw someone he recognized who could see him back without question.

But how could he just say all that and not sound... Crazy? Desperate?

To his embarrassment, Will realized he had been looking at Hannibal far too long without saying anything.

"Um, sorry." Will smiled sheepishly and cleared his throat, hoping his face didn't look as red as it felt.

"No apologies, remember?"

Will nodded. "Right, OK."

"Because I want you to feel comfortable."

"I had a dream about you. Several dreams, actually." Will interrupted, then stopped, surprised at his admission.

"That's certainly not surprising, it's common for friends to feature in one another's dreams."

Will felt relief and a little disappointment in Hannibal's non-reaction, although he had not been entirely clear about why that would be a secret.

"Really? Do you dream about me, too?"

"I confess I rarely dream, but I have seen you on occasion."

Will swelled a little at this. Hannibal had thought about him, too, in his off-hours.

"What was I doing, in your dream?" Hannibal's voice had taken on a hypnotic note, and Will felt it a little easier to answer without restraint.

"This afternoon, after the campsite... I think I fell asleep in the shower. You were walking with Jack to the crime scene by the lake. You didn't see me, but I could see you. You seemed interested in everything else but the actual murder victims. The old shack. The water. And the little girl."

Hannibal's face showed surprise for a moment, then settled back into a mask of concern.

"What girl?"

"She rose up from the water and took your hand. She had white blonde hair, was about seven, eight years old in a white nightgown. You looked happy to see her, and she came back with you."

For the first time all evening, Hannibal seemed at a loss for words. Will saw his opening, and he took it.

"What did you tell Jack about the crime scene?"

"The same I told you at the start. Transformation. Spectacle. Growth."

"But there's more, isn't there?"

Will raised his eyebrows expectantly, and Hannibal paused. He did seem surprised or perhaps a little troubled at Will's insight. Will mentally congratulated himself at being able to surprise Hannibal without revelations of the heart, after all.

"I think you saw truly in your dream... or maybe it's better to call this one a vision. I was uninterested in studying the details of the case because you and Jack will soon find that it is already solved."

Now it was Will's turn to be surprised.

"Among your thicket of reaching arms, you will find a matching pair that is unique, and beneath the sand lies the rest of her body, planted whole. This is the woman responsible for the display. But she is no murderer. The remaining 'victims' are almost certainly alive and well, although they will find it more difficult to zip up a sweater."

Will was at a complete loss for words.

"How do you... why would you not tell Jack?"

"Once they remove the display, they will find her anyway and the case may be as good as solved. Anyhow, the only possible murder we have left to be concerned about is the one at the campsite."

"You didn't tell me about the girl. Who is she?"

"Her name is Mischa, she was my sister."

"Was?" Realization crossed Will's face a half second after he said it. He regretted it immediately.

Hannibal nodded and looked down at his hands. "She died a long time ago."

A pause passed between them, in the ghost of the space was Will saying something like *"I'm sorry"* and Hannibal reprimanding him for a third time. They let it pass in silence.

"Will," Hannibal started, then paused. "What was your family like?"

A long exhale, followed by a swallow. These were unpleasant memories Hannibal had asked for.

"There's not much to tell."

"I'd like to hear anything you feel comfortable sharing."

Will hesitated. "Is this therapy?"

"No."

Will nodded and thought, feeling back through the fog of his mind for these memories. Hannibal had shared something with him. He was grateful for the glimpse into his past, even for the sorrows that came with it.

"My mother died when I was very young."

"Was she sick?"

"I don't think so. My father never talked about it." There was a twinge of bitterness there.

"Your father, what was he like?"

"Quiet. Kept to himself. He was... hard to know." Will shifted, testing his limbs, and settled further back in his chair, legs falling apart and open. "We traveled, chasing whatever work he could find. Never stayed in one place long. We were poor."

Hannibal nodded over the facts of Will's early life. They carried oceans of grief and loneliness, a life unmoored and not fully understood.

"Did you have siblings? Other family?"

Will shook his head. "Dad was an orphan. I never knew other family. He had... few friends. After he died, it was hard."

"I'm sorry, Will. Your upbringing sounds unspeakably lonely."

Will nodded and offered a tight smile despite it. "It was."

They sat in parallel silence, Hannibal considering the path of least resistance. Thankfully, Will continued.

"I was 14. They said there was... an accident. In the woods. The police, um." Will swallowed around his grief. "Wouldn't let me see. Closed casket, you know. I was staying with a friend."

Hannibal closed his eyes against the vision of it.

"They said it was... maybe a hunting accident? But..." Will's face was fixed with that same tight smile, but his jaw worked beneath the flesh. "Dad didn't hunt. For a while, I thought maybe... he did it? Himself. It was a small town. They didn't look into it. Or want to."

"Is that why you chose the path you did?"

Will nodded. "Part of it. At some level I guess I wanted to understand what happened. And maybe the next time, the next kid..."

"Could find the closure you were denied?"

Another nod, then Will pressed his hands to his face and exhaled. He breathed in the dusk, darkness creeping into him in all directions.

"Hannibal, I think there's something wrong with me." There was a wobble in his voice he couldn't control.

"Your earliest memories of loss are a founding influence, but they are not all of you, Will."

"No... I mean I'm probably, *definitely*, damaged from," Will waved a hand dismissively, "a lifetime of loneliness or whatever you want to call it. But I have a lot of ugly things rattling around in my head, and..."

Will's fear bubbled up until it was almost spilling. He was trembling.

"I have nightmares. I lose time. I wake up... sometimes in the woods and I have no idea how I got there. I hear things. I have all sorts of strange *feelings*."

"One might argue the cost of imagination—"

"No, I don't think it's in my head. At least not anymore." Will shook more violently now. "I feel sick, Hannibal. At the campsite I saw... no, I *felt*. I felt like *I had done that*. How could I have done that?"

Will's voice broke, any control he had was lost. He could barely stand to look at Hannibal, admitting his worst fears, but he couldn't stop himself. The words were tumbling out carried on the threat of a sob lodged in his throat.

"What if I did it? What if I did it and I can't remember?"

"If so, you must have had a good reason. And you must not have been yourself."

"I don't—" Will breathed faster now, panic beginning to overtake him. "I don't feel like myself."

Hannibal watched with dark eyes that radiated power and spoke again in that same peculiar tone that commanded answers.

"What do you feel like, Will?"

"I feel... like a *monster*."

Fear, shame, and guilt squeezed him from all sides. The cry in his throat loosed itself and Will succumbed to his panic. Organs twisted in his body and fire licked across his network of fragile nerves, burning him alive.

"*What's happening to me?*"

Breath and pulse crashed together in Will's ears, a cacophony of sound drowning his senses. He was hot and cold at the same time, skin clammy and crawling. The sick feeling warping his gut squeezed the air from his lungs and the blood from his brain. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. The room tipped sideways in the tunnel of his vision, and somewhere in the distance dogs were howling, echoing his panic.

Suddenly, Hannibal was on his knees before him, holding Will's face in his hands, steadying, insisting he look at him. That same comforting wave of calm pulled him like before, and he was again transfixed by it despite the tempest raging within.

"Will, listen to me."

Like an anchor, Hannibal held Will against the swift current of madness that threatened to drag him under. In his tunnel of terror, Hannibal was all he could see. Will's body felt unnaturally heavy and large, and he trembled still, eyes wide with fear of all possibilities. Hannibal was calling his name, a trail of words Will could use to find his way back to himself.

"I have known true monsters in my lifetime, and you could never, *never* be one."

Competing waves of panic and calm fought for control of his body. Will fought against the pull of darkness, keeping eyes forward and fixed on Hannibal. Eventually, his breathing slowed and he allowed the calm to overtake him. His organs settled back into place one by one and his vision began to clear. Will gulped air, fighting to return to himself back to normal.

"A long time ago, I lost my sister, my mother and my father. I loved them fiercely, but I couldn't protect them. I was still a boy myself, when they were taken from me. It is my greatest regret. I swore I would never allow that to happen again."

Hannibal still held Will's face in his hands and made him keep eye contact. His eyes held a fraction of pain, but burned gold with the promise that everything would be OK, no matter what. Will saw the shadow of Hannibal's family in those eyes, the memory of them moving behind the reflection of Will's face.

"The people I care about, they are my family. And it is my fiercest wish to protect my family at all costs. I would protect them with my life, Will. Do you understand?"

Will gaped at the implication. His brain was working slow, caught between the triangle of Hannibal's hands, eyes, and words.

"Do you mean me?"

"Yes, I do."

This was beginning to feel like another dream. Hannibal was holding him safe, weaving some spell of protection over him promising to safeguard him from the entire world no matter what because they were *family*. It was a word and concept Will had lost connection to a very long time ago. Will's eyes pricked tears involuntarily.

"Even if I am a danger to you and others? To myself?"

"Especially then," Hannibal almost whispered. He then moved one hand to grip Will at the base of the neck and pull him closer, as if sharing another secret.

"Not all power is a threat, Will, if it can be controlled, given purpose. Lethal, wild lightning turns to energy with control. Fire can spread and devastate or it can provide warmth and nourishment – but only if brought to purpose. How marvelous and thrilling it can be to wield power like a hot knife. But it takes practice and discipline, and it needs you to be brave."

Will understood in his body, but his head was swimming. He could only nod and soak in Hannibal's gaze, the firm hand on his neck. He was extremely thirsty, but not for drink. He was being drawn to the edge of his seat. Hannibal's words were soft and lapping at his ears. But his body understood. *Control. Discipline. Obedience.* His cells sang the words, and he relaxed into them, absorbing them fully.

"Now, how do you feel?"

Hannibal severed their contact, releasing him, and Will slowly came back to himself. He felt fuzzy, wrung out, exhausted. There was an empty, hollow echo of loss like before, but this time Hannibal was right here, and he was safe.

Control. Discipline. Obedience.

The fire was dying. Will swallowed thickly coming out of his stupor. He closed his eyes and felt the quiet warmth of the room and the steady, soothing presence of his friend before him. They were sheltered in a bubble of peace amid the cold and wild world outside. Whatever horrors waited out there, they would not trouble them here.

Will stilled and breathed, soaking in the peaceful feeling, pushing aside a twinge of embarrassment over his apparent stress-inspired panic attack.

"I feel all right now, thank you. I... I think I may have had too much to drink."

Hannibal smiled weakly and slumped a little, still on his knees, looking suddenly drained. It seemed like whatever had transpired between them had sapped him of his usual boundless energy. He slowly shifted to sit fully on the floor, eyes closed, resting his head on Will's knee for a moment while he recovered.

"Maybe I did, too."

Hannibal looked tired and pale, and his perfect hair had fallen out of place during Will's episode. Will realized that he hadn't seen Hannibal eat much of anything since the night before, despite him cooking two meals for Will's enjoyment.

Will moved with care to sweep the fallen fringe from Hannibal's forehead, earning him a quiet hum of pleasure. He felt so cold. Will felt the need to take care of Hannibal, too. He didn't know exactly what he could offer, but it was clear they both needed rest.

"I um, I don't know if you have sleeping arrangements, but you're more than welcome to have my bed, or even share. Whatever you—"

"Jack gave me a key to a cabin across the loop," Hannibal firmly cut him off. "I'm all taken care of."

"Oh," Will nodded, a heavy stone of disappointment settling in his chest. "OK. Great." He did not feel great.

"You should sleep, Will."

Will stared at the fading embers of their happy fire and worried his, lip lost in the sudden shift in Hannibal's mood. He didn't know what he wanted exactly – or what Hannibal wanted with him – but he knew he couldn't bear for Hannibal to leave just yet. His body railed against it.

Control. Discipline. Obedience.

Will understood the instructions, but what good was control if it left him alone?

"I just–"

Hannibal ignored the beginning of Will's protest and pulled himself to standing with effort. Avoiding Will's eyes, Hannibal set about the somber business of clearing up after dinner and preparing himself to go.

"Hannibal, please wait."

Will stood on shaky legs and crossed the room to Hannibal, taking the plates gently from his hand and setting them aside. He searched the cabin walls and floor for something, *anything*, he could say that would keep Hannibal from leaving tonight.

Hannibal had welcomed Will into his home, bathed him, cared for him through his troubles, followed him up a mountain and deep into the woods, nourished him, shared the pain of his past... and through it all, Hannibal had accepted him whole without question or reproach.

It was such a simple *little thing*, and Hannibal had said it over and over in all the quiet ways that only Will could hear if he cared to listen. The ghost of a shared sentiment that ran like an invisible thread throughout their time together. Perhaps Hannibal needed to hear him to say it, too.

Will trembled again with new fear and breathed into it, filling himself up with courage. He had to try. Because Will felt certain that if Hannibal left him now, he would die from the loss of him.

"Um, what you said before about being... being family and protecting the people you care about... I feel the same way, Hannibal. *Exactly* the same way."

Will moved forward slowly, closing the fraction of space between them. He raised a hesitating hand to cup Hannibal's cheek, mirroring the way Hannibal had held him before, cradling his face in his open palm. Hannibal was unreadable, completely still. A marble statue betrayed only by blinking eyes and occasional slow breath. Will's heart beat wildly in his chest, threatening to bruise itself on his ribs as this final secret fought to escape from behind clumsy lips and teeth.

"I – I've been alone. *Really* alone for a long time... and so have you, I think. Hannibal, I care about you in a way that... I haven't quite experienced before and don't exactly understand yet, but..."

Hannibal was so quiet, just quiet. Why was he just being so quiet? Will couldn't tell if he was ruining everything or saving his own life, but he knew he had to keep going or else he would perish from the pain of it. This felt like his one and only chance to live.

"I want you to stay. With me. Please. I need you here with me, now. Tomorrow. All the days after. I just want you, Hannibal. It's all I want. It's all I feel like I'll ever want."

Will blinked his eyes shut and pressed his forehead to Hannibal's, breathing in frustration in the space between the two of them.

"God, I'm really bad at this." Will's breath shook with nervous laughter, which made Hannibal finally break and breathe a small laugh, too.

"I think this is my desperate attempt to tell you that..." Will swallowed. "Hannibal, I think I love you."

They breathed together in the inches between them, mouths nearly touching, but not quite. Will waited for an answer for long hopeful moments, but then Hannibal withdrew, looking a little sad.

Looking down, Hannibal slowly removed Will's hand from his cheek, then moved to thread his long fingers through Will's, testing how that felt before he spoke.

"I have had a lifetime of waiting and wanting. I have had immeasurable disappointment and loss. Will, you are too valuable to me to lose or hurt because of a bottle of wine and unfortunate timing."

Will opened his mouth to protest, but Hannibal commanded him to silence with a look.

"I'm afraid of you doing something you may come to regret no matter how much I also yearn for it myself. This is a river that once you cross with me, you cannot swim back to the other shore. Everything will change, forever, Will. And I need you to be absolutely sure."

Will replied breathlessly without hesitation, "I am sure."

Hannibal held Will's eyes with a sad intensity, and brought their entwined hands to brush his lips.

"I believe you," Hannibal said like an apology.

He tested a kiss on one knuckle, then another, and finally the thumb. Like holy relics, he worshiped them one by one, paying tribute. This was his rosary.

Will stood completely still, afraid to move or else he might break the spell.

Indulging himself, Hannibal brushed the wide pad of Will's thumb over his bottom lip before opening, and taking him slowly, fully into the velvet heat of his mouth.

Will groaned involuntarily at the exquisite feeling of being enveloped like this and gently savored. Hannibal's tongue dragged the length of Will's thumb as he tasted him. Salt and

pine, roasted meat, and sweet cotton. Hannibal closed over him with soft lips, testing with teasing suction, and releasing at last with a final graze of teeth.

Now it was Hannibal's turn to tremble. His breath grew ragged and heavy, gusting over Will's palm and down to the wrist. He mouthed at the tender skin of his pulse point. There was a kind of hunger building that he was clearly fighting.

Control. Discipline. Obedience.

"I believe you," Hannibal repeated, barely a whisper. "I believe you."

He looked lost, locked in battle with himself over some unknown mystery. Will didn't fully understand, but guessed that Hannibal had likely tried to spare them both whatever misery raged within when he first prepared to slip away.

That was OK. They had time to figure it all out.

Will gently removed his wrist from Hannibal's grasp and instead wrapped both arms around him, holding him tight against his body with firm pressure. Their foreheads touched again as Hannibal swallowed and steadied his breath, eyes closed, regaining his composure.

"Thank you, Will."

"Please stay with me. We can just sleep."

Hannibal nodded in humble agreement. "I think I would like that very much."

Will led them both to the small, worn bed in the corner of the room and they settled in, Hannibal forming his body to support Will's curves and angles, winding arms around him, holding him there in the stillness of the cabin. Hannibal breathed peace over them both and hummed snatches of a daina he remembered from a life long ago. Deep notes rumbled his chest as Will lay curled against him, protected.

LISTEN: <https://youtu.be/MdN8310EkxU>

Eisva mudu abudu	The two of us shall go together,
Į žalią giružę abudu.	to a green wood, the two of us together.
Kirsva mudu abudu	The two of us shall cut down together,
Žaliosias liepužes abudu.	green linden trees, the two of us together.
Pjausva mudu abudu	The two of us shall cut out together
Naujasias lentužes abudu.	new boards, the two of us together.

Dirbsva mudu abudu	The two of us shall build together
Naujają lovųžę abudu.	the new bed, the two of us together.
Klosva mudu abudu	The two of us shall spread together
Naujają paklodę abudu.	the new bedsheets, the two of us together.
Gulsva mudu abudu	The two of us shall lie down together
Į naują lovųžę abudu.	in the new bed, the two of us together.
Darysva mudu abudu	The two of us shall make together
Žaliają vygužę abudu.	a green cradle, the two of us together.
Guldysva mudu abudu	The two of us shall lay down together
Mažąjį vaikelį abudu.	the little baby, the two of us together.
Vyguosva mudu abudu	The two of us shall sway together
Mažąjį veikelį abudu.	The little baby, the two of us together.

Chapter End Notes

Eisva Mudu Abudu (The Two Of Us Shall Go Together) is a Lithuanian folksong Hannibal learned from his mother.

Here is a lovely version performed by Such'a'Trip to listen to!

<https://youtu.be/MdN8310EkxU>

End Notes

Thank you for reading! <3

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